

Democracy & Education

What Is Education For?

A Response to *What Kind of Citizens Do Educators Hope Their Students Become?*

A Response to “Storypath: A Powerful Tool for Engaging Children in Civic Learning.”

Margit E. McGuire (Seattle University), Laurie Stevahn (Seattle University),
Shari Wennik Bronsther (Echo Lake Elementary School, Shoreline, WA)

Abstract

Darwich (2020) asked “What Kind of Citizens Do Educators Hope Their Students Become?” in her response to “Storypath: A Powerful Tool for Engaging Children in Civic Education” (McGuire et al., 2019). She argued that civics should be rooted in social justice grounded by critical civic empathy, which requires focusing on power and privilege given persistent disparities in caring for all people within our democracy. We agree and here further emphasize the importance of dismantling systems of oppression that block efforts to advance this goal. We also recognize pragmatic complexities in elementary school classrooms that require teacher professional judgment to create conditions for success. These include attending to diverse developmental needs of learners, classroom time constraints, and instructional standards that do not explicitly focus on social justice. We describe how the teacher in McGuire et al. navigated these challenges and call for systemic change to support teachers in routinely engaging all children in experiential civic learning grounded by critical civic empathy.

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“WHAT KIND OF Citizens Do Educators Hope Their Students Become?” is the question Darwich (2020) asked in her response to “Storypath: A Powerful Tool for Engaging Children in Civic Education” (McGuire et al., 2019). We agree with the importance of this question for civic learning and argue that it points to a larger enduring question: What is education for?

Nearly 40 years ago in the United States, *A Nation at Risk* fundamentally shifted answers to this question by prioritizing literacy and mathematics, especially in elementary education. At that time, President Ronald Reagan and Secretary of Education Terrel Bell created the National Commission on Excellence in

Education (1983) that issued this report. It quickly ignited a political debate about the purpose of public schools and significantly

MARGIT E. MCGUIRE is a professor of teacher and social studies education at Seattle University and has written 26 Storypath units on a variety of topics. Laurie Stevahn is a professor of education at Seattle University, specializing in theory, research, and practice of leadership, cooperative learning, conflict resolution, and social justice. Shari Wennik Bronsther is a teacher at Echo Lake Elementary School in Shoreline, Washington. She has taught numerous Storypath units throughout her 18-year career.

changed the national dialogue that in many ways continues to frame conversations about education today. Overall, the report indicted public schools for failing to meet the needs of children and their communities, stating that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (p. 9). This resulted in refocusing education on national and state standards, back-to-basics curricula, and standardized achievement tests for public accountability. It also resulted in civic education taking a back seat in elementary classrooms, especially in culturally and linguistically diverse schools serving children from low-income families (Duke et al., 2020; McGuire, 2007).

In McGuire et al. (2019), we suggested reasons why civic learning struggles for attention in elementary education. We also described a Storypath unit taught in a fourth-grade classroom to illustrate the feasibility of this approach for meaningfully involving children in civics while simultaneously integrating literacy and social-emotional learning (SEL). Essentially, we demonstrated how Storypath’s five components—setting, characters, context, controversies, conclusion—provided a feasible yet rigorous organizing framework for authentically engaging the children in democratic practices aimed at equitably resolving issues of affordable housing and homelessness, while also supporting multidisciplinary learning in authentic ways.

Darwich (2020) responded by agreeing that civic education matters for young learners. She further argued that “civic learning needs to be rooted in the principles of social justice” (p. 2) and positioned “critical civic empathy” as integral to this goal, based on Mirra’s (2018) definition:

1. It begins from an analysis of the social position, power, and privilege of all parties involved.
2. It focuses on the ways that personal experiences matter in the context of public life.
3. It fosters democratic dialogue and civic action committed to equity and justice. (p. 7)

Darwich noted how the Storypath described in McGuire et al. (2019) created personal experiences for the learners as they engaged in democratic dialogue and civic action to deal with issues of affordable housing and homelessness in just and equitable ways. However, she questioned the extent to which the children examined positions of power and privilege and suggested examples for explicitly involving children in doing so to cultivate critical civic empathy.

We agree that critical civic empathy provides an important lens for conceptualizing, planning, and facilitating civic learning. We further contend that to normalize its focus in civics (and other disciplines), critical civic empathy must become broadly and deeply embedded within public education, beyond one lesson or unit of study. However, for this to occur, additional considerations warrant attention, as highlighted in this response. First, we believe that widespread systemic change in education is necessary to support, cultivate, and achieve the civic learning goals grounded by critical civic empathy that Darwich (2020) advocated. Such

fundamental change within the American educational system will require sustained social, political, economic, and moral will across the populace and its leaders. A new blueprint is needed to guide the purpose of education in our democratic society that claims equality, liberty, and justice for all. Second, we must acknowledge the complexities and practical considerations of civic learning designed to successfully create authentic, interactive, lived experiences for children in elementary school. This includes the challenges of implementing integrated approaches to instruction while managing time given competing requirements, as well as providing developmentally appropriate learning materials and experiences necessary for success. It also includes the challenge of addressing required national and state standards that articulate academic content and skills, yet do not explicitly focus on social justice and critical civic empathy. We revisit the Storypath unit described in McGuire et al. (2019) to highlight how teacher professional judgment played an instrumental role in successfully navigating these pragmatic realities. In doing so, we argue that the young children who experienced this Storypath did consider power and privilege while engaged in democratic processes to establish fair housing policies, although not explicitly in the ways that Darwich suggested. Finally, we call for educational systems and policies that will hold schools accountable for providing rigorous and developmentally appropriate civic education that includes critical civic empathy for all learners, as well as support teacher agency in pursuing this mission.

Dismantling Systems of Oppression

We believe that education plays a vital role in long-term, justice-oriented civic learning capable of influencing the dismantling of social and institutional systems of oppression. We also believe that this necessarily involves challenging assumptions about fairness, equality, inclusion, power, privilege, and allyship for the type of substantive shifts required for a just and humane world.

Developing a critical theory lens (e.g., see Özlem & DiAngelo, 2017) to recognize and challenge structural and systemic policies and practices of injustice rooted in power and privilege will be fundamental to meaningfully change attitudes, commitments, and actions for justice and equity. Yet we often see a “disconnect” between classrooms and schools. Many teachers have been working for years to dismantle racism and inequities in their classrooms, yet school structures seem immune to substantive change.

If in the 1980s *A Nation at Risk* fundamentally shifted national education policy and practice in ways that continue to affect schooling today, what actions can we take at this moment in time to structurally change schooling? Adhering to standards and standardized testing is the norm, while literacy and mathematics continue to take center stage. We wonder how a new report might galvanize the nation to prioritize civic learning as fundamental to “what education is for” in years to come. We envision such a report could be a catalyst to fuel the creation and adoption of developmentally appropriate guidelines for civic education, including a scope and sequence across all grade levels to fundamentally address not only what we teach but how we teach, and therefore

who gets access to a rigorous, relevant, and developmentally appropriate curriculum. Dare we hope for learner-centered civic curricula where teachers can tap into the backgrounds, interests, and experiences of their students? Dare we aspire for adequate funding and support for every learner, regardless of family circumstances? Dare we believe that education can play a significant role in dismantling long-ingrained systems of inequity in our nation?

Blow (2020) called for deeply rooted systemic change in his *New York Times* op-ed, “We Need a Civil Rights Act of 2020” (republished in other newspapers):

At this point, politicians are still playing safe, being risk-averse while calling it radical. They want the appearance of substantial action while leaving the substance of society untouched. They want to appear responsive without taking full responsibility. Poverty is the problem. Wealth inequality is the problem. All the things that lead to and attend poverty and wealth inequality are the problem. But no one wants to talk about that, let alone deal with it, because to truly tackle these issues would deal in some way with wealth redistribution, and the mere mention of that concept throws the comfortable and the rich into a tizzy. (p. A14)

Substantively tackling these inequalities means facing the entrenched racism in America that fuels such disparities, and in education these inequities start at the schoolhouse door. Abdul-Jabbar (2020) called this out in his *Los Angeles Times* op-ed, “Don’t Understand the Protests? What You’re Seeing Is People Pushed to the Edge”:

The black community is used to the institutional racism inherent in education, the justice system and jobs. And even though we do all the conventional things to raise public and political awareness—write articulate and insightful pieces in the Atlantic, explain the continued devastation on CNN, support candidates who promise change—the needle hardly budge . . . Racism in America is like dust in the air. It seems invisible—even if you’re choking on it—until you let the sun in. Then you see it’s everywhere . . . What I want to see is not a rush to judgment, but a rush to justice. (paras. 6, 8, 14)

Let’s start with public schools. Let’s fundamentally rethink how schools are organized and funded. Let’s rethink standards and curricula. Let’s always put students first and support teachers in meeting the needs of every learner. Let’s equip all children with civic competence and skills, including empathy.

Instructional Complexities

Lessons and Learners in Diverse Classrooms

Recognizing the current structural challenges of schooling, let’s now consider complexities within elementary classroom settings where opportunities for experiential civics such as Storypath compete for time and attention among other requirements. We acknowledge that teaching is exceedingly complicated because innumerable factors are constantly in play. We highlight these complexities because, realistically, teachers are navigating them moment to moment every day in the social and political

environments of schools. Table 1 highlights many of the complexities in the Storypath described in McGuire et al. (2019). Column 1 shows the array of learning goals and outcomes targeted from the onset. These include content knowledge, academic skills, social skills, and dispositions. Column 2 shows pedagogical considerations, beginning with the Storypath approach, chosen for its constructivist, simulation-like structure to authentically engage learners in cooperative/interactive activities requiring critical and creative thinking to resolve civic issues and social problems. Storypath also made it feasible to meaningfully integrate literacy and SEL into all the lessons/episodes that composed the unit. In addition, the fourth-graders who participated in this Storypath were diverse in personal characteristics, family situations, and cultural backgrounds, resulting in the type of heterogeneous classroom that holds promise for boosting achievement through the use of cooperative problem solving (Johnson & F. P. Johnson, 2017; Johnson & R. T. Johnson, 2009). Column 3 shows the school demographics that the classroom approximated.

The realities of managing these complexities throughout the Storypath required teacher expertise and professional judgment to promote and nurture the success of all children in accomplishing the numerous learning goals and outcomes. In reflecting on the unit, the teacher emphasized the challenge of developmental aspects of learning while also managing classroom time for instruction. In fact, time constraints were a constant reality as the teacher considered the developmental appropriateness of readings, resources, activities, and questions enabling 9- and 10-year-olds to grasp and build understanding of affordable housing in an urban area. Despite being fluent with the Storypath approach, this experienced teacher noted:

The topic of affordable housing was, without a doubt, the most difficult topic I have ever taught, as there are so many nuances and complexities to it. I had to get students to a level of understanding regarding the history and issues connected to the housing problem where they could develop and present ideas for solutions to the city council and planning commission. Trying to find articles at a fourth-grade reading and conceptual level was very challenging. I eventually found several articles that met these requirements, including one that talked about what other countries were doing to solve such a problem. Helping students understand these ideas took a large chunk of time.

Ultimately, the teacher guided the children to successfully understand the roots of homelessness and why housing is so expensive in Seattle. This included studying various types of jobs, their comparative salaries, and housing options. To enable the learners to comprehend the issue thoroughly enough to create solutions, the teacher also provided local documents about the housing shortage and reviewed Seattle’s history of subsidized housing, including recent renovations of low-income housing communities. The Storypath episodes naturally evolved as students tackled the problem of affordable housing and enacted the civic roles of mayor, city council, planning commission, and public meeting participants. Such roles established a foundation for

Table 1. Instructional Complexities of the Storypath Unit in McGuire et al. (2019)

Learning goals/outcomes: “What” to teach ¹	Pedagogical considerations	Learner demographics ²
Content knowledge <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Washington state/local government structures, agencies, policies, and operations—i.e., mayor, city council, planning commission• Housing affordability and homelessness in Seattle	Approach <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Storypath—constructivist learning through a simulation-like storyline composed of setting, characters, context, controversies, conclusion• Authentic and personally meaningful learning• Student engagement• Critical and creative thinking• Problem-solving• Action in a civic context• Integrated and multidisciplinary learning—civics, literacy, cooperative learning, social-emotional learning (SEL), critical civic empathy, etc.• Developmental appropriateness• Time issues/constraints and requirements for success	Elementary school <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Grade 4 classroom Age <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 9–10 years old Race/Ethnicity <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 37.9% White• 23.4% Hispanic/Latino• 16.4% Asian• 12.4% Two or more• 8.7% Black/African American• 1.2% Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander Language <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 23.2% English language learners Socioeconomic status (SES) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 39.8% Low income
Academic skills <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Read for information• Research to build and present knowledge• Write informative text• Synthesize research and write arguments to support claims• Present information and supporting evidence		
Social skills <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communicate ideas/arguments• Listen for understanding• Cooperatively resolve conflicts and problems• Reach consensus• Respect and care for others• Apply social-emotional skills within the context of a “lived experience”		
Dispositions <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Value the democratic process• Critically think about decision making and who decides• Examine fairness in the context of resolving controversies		

1. Learning goals and outcomes that grounded and guided the civic Storypath unit

2. See report card for Echo Lake Elementary School, Shoreline (Washington) School District, <https://washingtonstatereportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/ReportCard/ViewSchoolOrDistrict/101495>

understanding the nuances of power and privilege, and the interests and experiences of diverse people living in Seattle.

We assert that the children did engage in critical civic empathy, although we did not use that particular terminology, as they considered affordable housing for diverse Seattle residents. By presenting developmentally appropriate material in a storyline, children confronted and grappled with issues of fairness in ways that required empathetic understanding to create inclusive and humane solutions. Emotion drives learning, and Storypath taps into that human condition. This plants seeds of empathy for challenging assumptions, recognizing inequities, and considering bases of power and privilege. It also results in students becoming allies for inclusively and equitably resolving real-world problems while developing dispositions and skills for democratic dialogue and civic action.

Although critical civic empathy was not the starting point for the Storypath detailed in McGuire et al. (2019), the unit did purposefully engage young children in civic learning that enabled the development of social and emotional competencies by confronting issues of fairness in housing. This necessitated thinking about who had resources, advantages, and access (versus who did not), which is a form of critical civic empathy, even if not explicitly named. Ultimately, participating in this Storypath provided a “lived

experience” that enabled the children to progressively develop layers of conceptual understanding and an array of skills, including grappling with power and privilege. We viewed these accomplishments as developmental building blocks in a longer trajectory of learning. In fact, as noted in McGuire et al., these children did transfer their knowledge and skills. Shortly after completing the unit, and without teacher prompting, the children created signs and marched in two separate events, one advocating gender equality and the other promoting respect for diversity. Using the knowledge and skills they learned through the Storypath unit, the children demonstrated critical civic empathy as they engaged in civic action to make their voices heard. Ultimately, we believe our goal and role as educators is to cultivate knowledgeable and caring people who participate in democratic practices to solve social problems with equity and justice in mind. Imagine if civic units like the Storypath we described resulted in children routinely and on their own recognizing opportunities for democratic civic action and jumping in while carrying the banner for critical civic empathy. Indeed, starting young and continuing to cultivate these skills in learners across grade levels could significantly contribute to social transformation, making America a better place for all.

Developmental needs of learners and time considerations always factor into the professional judgments teachers make when

planning and teaching to successfully accomplish learning goals. Darwich (2020) did not address these pragmatic aspects of teaching, so we highlight them here. In addition, while the impact of one lesson or unit of study surely matters, we contend that the cumulative impact of numerous lessons and units that build upon each other over time are more compelling for nurturing what students internalize and transfer to the real world, including civic action grounded by critical civic empathy.

The Impact of Standards and Curricula on Instruction

There is an abundance of national and state standards that districts and, ultimately, teachers are expected to address, often leaving teachers with little or no discretion on where to place their teaching emphasis. School districts use these standards to guide instruction at each grade level. Further, districts often require the use of specific curricula and textbooks that tend to narrow teacher instructional discretion in determining how best to provide students with authentic learning relevant to real-world situations. This becomes more challenging when, currently, such standards do not explicitly address social justice or critical civic empathy, nor do they provide coordination for teaching these across grade levels, leaving teachers in precarious situations that require difficult choices. Do they subversively teach these important skills under the radar? Do they obtain publicly available materials designed to address these skills (e.g., see the Teaching Tolerance website for standards and resources) or project-based learning units like Storypath and somehow find time to insert these into the curricula? Do they create new units or lessons to teach these skills as integrated components of required instruction?

To accomplish requirements, yet move beyond a prescriptive curriculum, the teacher in McGuire et al. (2019) began by consulting the following standards for teaching social studies in general, and civics specifically.

- Shoreline School District (2015) Social Studies Philosophy Statement—describes general expectations for a robust K–12 social studies curriculum and cites the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction [OSPI], 2010) that focuses on researching, comprehending, understanding, analyzing, and evaluating perspectives, documents, and issues.
- Social Studies Learning Standards (OSPI, 2019)—describes Washington's fourth grade content and skill standards “to conduct research, deliberate and form and evaluate positions through the processes of reading, writing, and communicating” (p. 2), aligned with the National Council for the Social Studies (2013) C3 Framework.

The social studies content standards for Grade 4 broadly focused on learning about Washington. The teacher chose to concentrate on affordable housing in Seattle because it is a major urban area in the state, also near the school district. In addition, the

teacher chose the Storypath approach to accomplish content and skill standards because its structure enables learners to engage in civics, while simultaneously incorporating literacy, interpersonal, social-emotional, and dispositional learning. As characters in the Storypath—Seattle residents, the mayor, city council, and planning commission—the children examined political, social, and economic aspects of Seattle housing, an ongoing issue in the news, within the context of experientially learning about democratic government. It also enabled the children to tackle justice-oriented issues inherently associated with power and privilege, including how resources affect access to housing and homelessness, as well as how democratic processes can be leveraged for fair treatment and respect for all people. Ultimately, the children learned about topics and practiced skills that went beyond the stated standards. However, this occurred because of the teacher's determination, ingenuity, and expertise in navigating classroom challenges for success, not because of systemic supports for this type of teaching that tend to be absent in education.

We believe that Postman and Weingartner's (1969) classic book, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, continues to ring true today as teachers face a multitude of expectations and often prescriptive curricula that decrease their autonomy and center on literacy and mathematics at the expense of social studies and civic learning. It also strikes us that education continues to struggle with what Postman and Weingartner advocated all those years ago—that learners become critics of social and cultural contexts. We argue that teaching civics through rigorous experiential approaches like Storypath enables learners to do exactly that—critique social and institutional policies and practices and engage in democratic civic action to challenge norms that privilege some while marginalizing or excluding others, whether in housing, education, health care, employment, environmental sustainability, and numerous other aspects of life. We also contend that this entails teaching learners to analyze issues from a social justice lens, which surely would be enhanced by nurturing critical civic empathy.

However, realistically, the tension is palpable when teaching from a critical civic empathy framework in school systems that themselves do not adequately unpack power and privilege and thereby perpetuate inequalities, especially for children and families of color. Yet we know that some teachers creatively find ways to teach from a social justice framework—often as a “subversive activity.” Imagine how much more powerful such teaching would be if these expectations were embedded in national, state, and district standards and assessments and formally sanctioned by educational policies that clearly articulated and supported the developmental needs of learners.

Conclusion

We call upon legislative and educational leaders at all levels—national, state, and local—to create and hold schools accountable for being places where equity, diversity, and justice are central to education and where teacher agency is redefined in the interest of all children. If we do not have the moral and political courage to institute such changes, our nation seriously remains at

risk—not for “mediocrity,” as noted in 1983, but for failing to prioritize civic learning as essential across all grade levels and for all children regardless of their circumstances. Education should enable children and adolescents to meaningfully learn content, skills, and dispositions capable of effecting social inclusion, equality, and justice by participating in democratic civic life. The Storypath approach provides a feasible way to organize such experiential learning for young children.

We join Darwich (2020) in calling for critical civic empathy in civic learning because awakening a sense of injustice (e.g., see Deutsch, 2006) and challenging dominant cultural narratives and biases that have normalized inequity across America (e.g., see Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) are necessary for major societal shifts capable of disrupting the systemic structures keeping oppression in place, including those in education. All students deserve civic learning experiences that routinely examine power and privilege in developmentally appropriate ways within and across all grade levels. To achieve this goal, all teachers deserve systemic support for the instructional decisions and professional judgments needed to manage the unique circumstances, challenges, and complexities that influence classroom conditions for successful student learning.

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